Characters

- *lou* a practicing magician
- *alec* a frustrated, angry actor's actor
- *dahlia* young gypsy (singer/dancer)
- *eli* a bartender who is also a poet
- *bettina dahlia*'s co-worker in a chorus
- *lily* an unemployed actress working as a barmaid
- *natalie* a not too successful performer
- *ross* guitarist-singer with *natalie*
- *maxine* an experienced actress

Act 1

(there is a huge black-face mask hanging from the ceiling of the theater as the audience enters. in a way the show has already begun, for the members of the audience must integrate this grotesque, larger than life misrepresentation of life into their pre-show chatter. slowly the house lights fade, but the mask looms even larger in the darkness.

once the mask is all that can be seen, lou, the magician, enters. he is dressed in the traditional costume of Mr˙ Interlocutor: tuxedo, bow-tie, top hat festooned with all kinds of whatnots that are obviously meant for good luck, he does a few catchy "softshoe" steps & begins singing a traditional version of a black play song)

LOU

(singing)

10 lil picaninnies all in bed
one fell out and the other nine said:
i sees yr hiney
all black & shiny
i see yr hiney
all black & shiny/ shiny

(as a greeting)

yes/ yes/ yes isnt life wonderful

(confidentially)

my father is a retired magician
which accounts for my irregular behavior
everything comes outta magic hats
or bottles wit no bottoms & parakeets
are as easy to get as a couple a rabbits

or 3 fifty-cent pieces/ 1958
my daddy retired from magic & took
up another trade cuz this friend a mine
from the 3rd grade/ asked to be made white
on the spot
what cd any self-respectin colored american magician
do wit such an outlandish request/ cept
put all them razzamatazz hocus pocus zippity-doo-dah
thingamajigs away cuz
colored chirren believin in magic
waz becomin politically dangerous for the race
& waznt nobody gonna be made white
on the spot just
from a clap of my daddy's hands
& the reason i'm so peculiar's
cuz i been studyin up on my daddy's technique
& everything i do is magic these days
& it's very colored/ very now you see it/ now you
dont mess wit me

(boastfully)

i come from a family of retired
sorcerers/ active houngans & pennyante fortune tellers
wit 41 million spirits/ critturs & celestial bodies
on our side
i'll listen to yr problems
help wit yr career/ yr lover/ yr wanderin spouse
make yr grandma's stay in heaven more
gratifyin
ease yr mother thru menopause & show yr son
how to clean his room

(while lou has been easing the audience into acceptance of his appearance & the mask (his father, the ancestors, our magic), the rest of the company enters in tattered fieldhand garb, blackface, and the countenance of stepan fetchit when he waz frightened. their presence belies the magician's promise that "you'll be colored n love it," just as the minstrel shows were lies, but lou continues)

YES YES YES 3 wishes is all you get
scarlet ribbons for yr hair
a farm in mississippi
someone to love you madly
all things are possible
but aint no colored magician in his right mind
gonna make you white
i mean
this is blk magic
you lookin at
& i'm fixin you up good/ fixin you up good & colored
& you gonna be colored all yr life
& you gonna love it/ bein colored/ all yr life/ colored & love it
love it/ bein colored. SPELL #7!

(lou claps his hands, & the company which had been absolutely still til this moment/ jumps up. with a rhythm set on a washboard carried by one of them/ they begin a series of steps that identify every period of afro-american entertainment: from acrobats, comedians, tap-dancers, calindy dancers, cotton club choruses, apollo theatre du-wop groups, til they reach a frenzy in the midst of "hambone, hambone where ya been"/ & then take a bow à la bert williams/ the lights bump up abruptly.

the magician, lou, walks thru the black-faced figures in their kneeling poses, arms outstretched as if they were going to sing "mammy." he speaks now [as a companion of the mask] to the same audience who fell so easily into his hands & who were so aroused by the way the black-faced figures "sang n danced")

LOU

why dont you go on & integrate a german-american school in st˙ louis mo˙/ 1955/ better yet why dont ya go on & be a red niggah in a blk school in 1954/ i got it/ try & make one friend at camp in the ozarks in 1957/ crawl thru one a jesse james' caves wit a class of white kids waitin outside to see the whites of yr eyes/ why dontcha invade a clique of working class italians trying to be protestant in a jewish community/ & come up a spade/ be a lil too dark/ lips a lil too full/ hair entirely too nappy/ to be beautiful/ be a smart child trying to be dumb/ you go meet somebody who wants/ always/ a lil less/ be cool when yr body says hot/ & more/ be a mistake in racial integrity/ an error in white folks' most absurd fantasies/ be a blk kid in 1954/ who's not blk enuf to lovingly ignore/ not beautiful enuf to leave alone/ not smart enuf to move outta the way/ not bitter enuf to die at an early age/ why dontchu c'mon & live my life for me/ since the dreams aint enuf/ go on & live my life for me/ i didnt want certain moments at all/ i'd give em to anybody . . . awright. alec.

(the black-faced alec gives his minstrel mask to lou when he hears his name/ alec rises. the rest of the company is intimidated by this figure daring to talk without the protection of black-face. they move away from him/ or move in place as if in mourning)

ALEC

st˙ louis/ such a colored town/ a whiskey black space of history & neighborhood/ forever ours to lawrenceville/ where the only road open to me waz cleared by colonial slaves/ whose children never moved/ never seems like mended the torments of the Depression or the stains of demented spittle/ dropped from the lips of crystal women/ still makin independence flags/ st˙ louis/ on a halloween's eve to the veiled prophet/ usurpin the mystery of mardi gras/ i made it mine tho the queen waz always fair/ that parade of pagan floats & tambourines/ commemorates me/ unlike the lonely walks wit liberal trick or treaters/ back to my front door/ bag half empty/ my face enuf to scare anyone i passed/ gee/ a colored kid/ whatta gas. here/ a tree/ wanderin the horizon/ dipped in blues/ untended bones/ usedta hugs drawls rhythm & decency here a tree/ waitin to be hanged sumner high school/ squat & pale on the corner/ like our vision waz to be vague/ our memory of the war/ that made us free/ to be forgotten/ becomin paler/ linear movement from sous' carolina to missouri/ freedmen/ landin in jackie wilson's yelp/ daughters of the manumitted swimmin in tina turner's grinds/ this is chuck berry's town disavowin miscega-nation/ in any situation/ & they let us be/ electric blues & bo didley/ the rockin pneumonia & boogie-woogie flu/ the slop & short fried heads/ runnin always to the river chambersburg/ lil italy/ i passed everyday at the sweet shoppe/ & waz afraid/ the cops raided truants/ regularly/ & after dark i wd not be seen wit any other colored/ sane & lovin my life

(shouts n cries that are those of a white mob are heard, very loud . . . the still black-faced figures try to move away from the menacing voices & memories)

voices

hey niggah/ over here

ALEC

behind the truck lay five hands claspin chains

voices

hey niggah/ over here

ALEC

round the trees/ 4 more sucklin steel

voices

hey niggah/ over here

ALEC

this is the borderline

voices

hey niggah/ over here

ALEC

a territorial dispute

voices

hey niggah/ over here

ALEC

(crouched on floor)

cars loaded with families/ fellas from the factory/
one or two practical nurses/ become our trenches/
some dig into cement wit elbows/ under engines/
do not be seen in yr hometown
after sunset/ we suck up our shadows

(finally moved to tear off their "shadows," all but two of the company leave with their true faces bared to the audience. dahlia has, as if by some magical cause, shed not only her mask, but also her hideous overalls & picaninny-buckwheat wig, to reveal a finely laced unitard/ the body of a modern dancer. she throws her mask to alec, who tosses it away. dahlia begins a lyrical but pained solo as alec speaks for them)

ALEC
we will stand here
our shoulders embrace an enormous spirit
my dreams waddle in my lap
run round to miz bertha's
where lil richard gets his process
run backward to the rosebushes

& a drunk man lyin
down the block to the nuns
in pink habits/ prayin in a pink chapel
my dreams run to meet aunt marie
my dreams haunt me like the little geechee river
our dreams draw blood from old sores
this is our space
we are not movin

(dahlia finishes her movement/ alec is seen reaching for her/ lights out. in the blackout they exit as lou enters. lights come up on lou who repeats bitterly his challenge to the audience)

LOU
why dontchu go on & live my life for me
i didnt want certain moments at all
i'd give them to anybody

(lou waves his hand commanding the minstrel mask to disappear, which it does. he signals to his left & again by magic, the lights come up higher revealing the interior of a lower manhattan bar & its bartender, eli, setting up for the night. eli greets lou as he continues to set up tables, chairs, candles, etc˙, for the night's activities. lou goes over to the jukebox, & plays "we are family" by sister sledge. lou starts to tell us exactly where we are, but eli takes over as characters are liable to do. throughout eli's poem, the other members of the company enter the bar in their street clothes, & doing steps reminiscent of their solos during the minstrel sequence. as each enters, the audience is made aware that these ordinary people are the minstrels. the company continues to dance individually as eli speaks)

this is . . .

ELI
MY kingdom.
there shall be no trespassers/ no marauders
no tourists in my land
you nurture these gardens or be shot on sight
carelessness & other priorities
are not permitted within these walls
i am mantling an array of strength & beauty
no one shall interfere with this
the construction of myself
my city my theater
my bar come to my poems
but understand we speak english carefully
& perfect antillean french
our toilets are disinfected
the plants here sing to me each morning
come to my kitchen my parlor even my bed
i sleep on satin surrounded by hand made
infants who bring me good luck & warmth
come even to my door
the burglar alarm/ armed guards vault from the east side
if i am in danger a siren shouts
you are welcome
to my kingdom my city my self

but yr presence must not disturb these inhabitants
leave nothing out of place/ push no dust under my rugs
leave not a crack in my wine glasses
no finger prints
clean up after yrself in the bathroom
there are no maids here no days off
for healing no insurance policies
for dislocation of the psyche
aliens/ foreigners/ are granted resident status
we give them a little green card
as they prove themselves non-injurious
to the joy of my nation
i sustain no intrusions/ no double-entendre romance
no soliciting of sadness in my life
are those who love me well
the rest are denied their visas . . .
is everyone ready to boogie

(finally, when eli calls for a boogie, the company does a dance that indicates these people have worked & played together a long time. as dance ends, the company sits & chats at the tables & at the bar. this is now a safe haven for these "minstrels" off from work. here they are free to be themselves, to reveal secrets, fantasies, nightmares, or hope. it is safe because it is segregated & magic reigns.

lili, the waitress, is continually moving abt the bar, taking orders for drinks & generally staying on top of things)

ALEC
gimme a triple bourbon/ & a glass of angel dust
these thursday nite audiences are abt to kill me

(eli goes behind bar to get drinks)

DAHLIA

why do i drink so much?

bettina, lily, natalie

(in unison)

who cares?

DAHLIA

but i'm an actress. i have to ask myself these questions

LILY

that's a good reason to drink

DAHLIA

no/ i mean the character/ alec, you're a director/ give me some motivation

ALEC

motivation/ if you didn't drink you wd remember that you're not workin

LILY

i wish i cd get just one decent part

LOU

say as lady macbeth or mother courage

ELI

how the hell is she gonna play lady macbeth and macbeth's a white dude?

LILY

ross & natalie/ why are you countin pennies like that?

NATALIE

we had to wait on our money again

ROSS

and then we didnt get it

BETTINA

maybe they think we still accept beads & ribbons

NATALIE

i had to go around wit my tambourine just to get subway fare

ELI

dont worry abt it/ have one on me

NATALIE

thank you eli

BETTINA

(falling out of her chair)

oh . . .

ALEC

cut her off eli/ dont give her no more

LILY

what's the matter bettina/ is yr show closin?

BETTINA

(gets up, resets chair)

no/ my show is not closin/ but if that director asks me to play it any blacker/ i'm gonna have to do it in a mammy dress

LOU

you know/ countin pennies/ lookin for parts/ breakin tambourines/ we must be outta our minds for doin this

BETTINA

no we're not outta our minds/ we're just sorta outta our minds

LILY

no/ we're not outta our minds/ we've been doing this shit a long time . . . ross/ captain theophilis conneau/ in *a slaver's logbook*/ says that "youths of both sexes wear rings in the nose and lower lip and stick porcupine quills thru the cartilage of the ear." ross/ when ringlin' bros. comes to madison square garden/ dontcha know the white people just go

ROSS

in their cb radios

DAHLIA

in their mcdonald's hats

ELI

with their save america t-shirts & those chirren who score higher on IQ tests for the white chirren who speak english

ALEC

when the hockey games absorb all america's attention in winter/ they go with their fists clenched & their tongues battering their women who dont know a puck from a 3-yr-old harness racer

BETTINA

they go & sweat in fierce anger

ROSS

these factories

NATALIE

these middle management positions

ROSS

make madison square garden

BETTINA

the temple of the primal scream

(lily gets money from cash register & heads toward jukebox)

LILY

oh how they love blood

NATALIE

& how they dont even dress for the occasion/ all inconspicuous & pink

ELI

now if willie colon come there

BETTINA
if/ we say/ the fania all stars gonna be there
in that nasty fantasy of the city council
ROSS

where the hot dogs are not even hebrew national

LILY

and the bread is stale

ROSS

even in such a place where dance is an obscure notion

BETTINA

where one's joy is good cause for a boring chat with the pinkerton guard

DAHLIA

where the halls lead nowhere

ELI

& "back to yr seat/ folks"

LILY

when all one's budget for cruisin

LOU

one's budget for that special dinner with you know who

LILY

the one you wd like to love you

BETTINA
when yr whole reasonable allowance for leisure activity/
buys you a seat where what's goin on dont matter
DAHLIA

cuz you so high up/ you might be in seattle

LILY

even in such a tawdry space

ELI

where vorster & his pals wd spit & expect black folks to lick it up

ROSS

(stands on chair)

in such a place i've seen miracles

all

oh yeah/ aw/ ross

ROSS

the miracles

("music for the love of it," by butch morris, comes up on the jukebox/ this is a catchy uptempo rhythm & blues post WW II. as they speak the company does a dance that highlights their ease with one another & their familiarity with "all the new dance steps")

LILY

the commodores

DAHLIA

muhammad ali

NATALIE

bob marley

ALEC

& these folks who upset alla 7th avenue with their glow/ how the gold in their braids is new in this world of

hard hats & men with the grace of wounded buffalo/ how these folks in silk & satin/ in bodies reekin of good love comin/ these pretty muthafuckahs

DAHLIA

make this barn

LILY

this insult to good taste

BETTINA

a foray into paradise

dahlia, lily, alec, natalie, & ross

(in unison)

we dress up

bettina, eli, & lou

(in unison)

we dress up

DAHLIA

cuz we got good manners

ROSS

cd you really ask Dr˙ funkenstein to come all that way & greet him in the clothes you sweep yr kitchen in?

all

NO!

BETTINA

cd you say to muhammad ali/ well/ i just didnt have a chance to change/ you see i have a job/ & then i went jogging & well, you know its just madison square garden

LOU

my dear/ you know that wont do

NATALIE

we honor our guests/ if it costs us all we got

DAHLIA

when stevie wonder sings/ he don't want us lookin like we ain't got no common sense/ he wants us to be as

lovely as we really are/ so we strut & reggae

ELI

i seen some doing the jump up/ i myself just got happy/ but i'm tellin you one thing for sure

LILY

we fill up where we at

BETTINA

no police

NATALIE

no cheap beer

DAHLIA

no nasty smellin bano

ROSS

no hallways fulla derelicts & hustlers

NATALIE

gonna interfere wit alla this beauty

ALEC

if it wasnt for us/ in our latino chic/ our rasta-fare our outer space funk suits & all the rest i have never seen

BETTINA

tho my daddy cd tell you bout them fox furs & stacked heels/ the diamonds & marie antoinette wigs

ELI

it's not cuz we got money

NATALIE

it's not cuz if we had money we wd spend it on luxury

LILY

it's just when you gotta audience with the pope/ you look yr best

BETTINA

when you gonna see the queen of england/ you polish yr nails

NATALIE

when you gonna see one of them/ & you know who i mean

ALEC

they gotta really know

BETTINA

we gotta make em feel

ELI

we dont do this for any old body

LOU

we're doin this for you

NATALIE

we dress up

ALEC

is our way of sayin/ you gettin the very best

DAHLIA

we cant do less/ we love too much to be stingy

ROSS

they give us too much to be loved ordinary

LILY

we simply have good manners

ROSS

& an addiction to joy

female cast members

(in unison)

WHEE . . .

DAHLIA

we dress up

male cast members

(in unison)

HEY . . .

BETTINA

we gotta show the world/ we gotta corner on the color

ROSS

happiness just jumped right outta us/ & we are lookin good

(everyone in the bar is having so much fun/ that maxine takes on an exaggerated character as she enters/ in order to bring them to attention. the company freezes, half in respect/ half in parody)

MAXINE

cognac!

(the company relaxes, goes to tables or the bar. in the meantime, ross has remained in the spell of the character that maxine had introduced when she came in. he goes over to maxine who is having a drink/ & begins an improvisation)

ROSS

she left the front gate open/ not quite knowing she wanted someone to walk on thru the wrought iron fence/ scrambled in whiskey bottles broken round old bike spokes/ some nice brown man to wind up in her bed/ she really didnt know/ the sombrero that enveloped her face was a lil too much for an april nite on the bowery/ & the silver halter dug out from summer cookouts near riis beach/ didnt sparkle with the intensity of her promise to have one good time/ before the children came back from carolina. brooklyn cd be such a drag. every street cept flatbush & nostrand/ reminiscent of europe during the plague/ seems like nobody but sickness waz out walkin/ drivels & hypes/ a few youngsters lookin for more than they cd handle/ & then there waz fay/

(maxine rises, begins acting the story out)

waitin for a cab. anyone of the cars inchin along the boulevard cd see fay waznt no whore/ just a good clean woman out for the nite/ & tho her left titty jumped out from under her silver halter/ she didnt notice cuz she waz lookin for a cab. the dank air fondled her long saggin bosom like a possible companion/ she felt good. she stuck her tin-ringed hand on her waist & watched her own ankles dance in the nite. she waz gonna have a good time tonight/ she waz awright/ a whole lotta woman/ wit that special brooklyn bottom strut. knowin she waznt comin in til dawn/ fay covered herself/ sorta/ wit a light kacky jacket that just kept her titties from rompin in the wind/ & she pulled it closer to her/ the winds waz comin/ from nowhere jabbin/ & there waznt no cabs/ the winds waz beatin her behind/ whisperin/ gigglin/ you aint goin noplace/ you an ol bitch/ shd be at home wit ur kids. fay beat off the voices/ & an EBONY-TRUE-TO-YOU cab climbed the curb to get her.

(as cabdriver)

hope you aint plannin on stayin in brooklyn/ after 8:00 you dead in brooklyn.

(as narrator)

she let her titty shake like she thot her mouth oughtta bubble like/ wd she take off her panties/ i'd take her anywhere.

MAXINE

(as if in cab)

i'm into havin a good time/ yr arms/ veins burstin/ like you usedta lift tobacco onto trucks or cut cane/ i want you to be happy/ long as we dont haveta stay in brooklyn

ROSS

& she made like she waz gypsy rose lee/ or the hotsy totsy girls in the carnival round from waycross/ when it waz segregated

MAXINE

what's yr name?

ROSS

my name is raphael

MAXINE

oh that's nice

ROSS

& fay moved where i cd see her out the rear view mirror/ waz tellin me all bout her children & big eddie who waz away/ while we crossed the manhattan bridge/ i kept smilin.

(as cabdriver)

where exactly you goin?

MAXINE

i dont really know. i just want to have a good time. take me where i can see famous people/ & act bizarre like sinatra at the kennedys/ maybe even go round & beat up folks like jim brown/ throw somebody offa balcony/ you know/ for a good time

ROSS

the only place i knew/ i took her/ after i kisst the spaces she'd been layin open to me. fay had alla her $17 cuz i hadnt charged her nothin/ turned the meter off/ said it waz wonderful to pick up a lady like her on atlantic avenue/ i saw nobody but those goddamn whores/ & fay

(maxine moves in to ross & gives him a very long kiss)

now fay waz a gd clean woman/ & she waz burstin with pride & enthusiasm when she walked into the place where I swore/ all the actresses & actors hung out

(the company joins in ross' story; responding to maxine as tho she waz entering their bar)

oh yes/ there were actresses in braids & lipstick/ wigs & winged tip pumps/ fay assumed the posture of someone she'd always admired/ etta james/ the waitress asked her to leave cuz she waz high/ & fay knew

better than that

MAXINE

(responding to lily's indication of throwing her out)

i aint high/ i'm enthusiastic/ and i'm gonna have me a gooooooood/ ol time

ROSS

she waz all dressed up/ she came all the way from brooklyn/ she must look high cuz i/ the taxi-man/ well i got her a lil excited/ that waz all/ but she waz gonna cool out/ cuz she waz gonna meet her friends/ at this place/ yes. she knew that/ & she pushed a bunch of rhododendrum/ outta her way so she cd get over to that table/ & stood over the man with the biggest niggah eyes & warmest smellin mouth

MAXINE

please/ let me join you/ i come all the way from brooklyn/ to have a good time/ you dont think i'm high do ya/ cd i please join ya/ i just wanna have a good ol time

ROSS

(as bettina turns away)

the woman sipped chablis & looked out the window hopin to see one of the bowery drunks fall down somewhere/ fay's voice hoverin/ flirtin wit hope

LOU

(turning to face maxine)

why dont you go downstairs & put yr titty in yr shirt/ you cant have no good time lookin like that/ now go on down & then come up & join us

(bettina & lou rise & move to another table)

ROSS

fay tried to shove her flesh anywhere/ she took off her hat/ bummed a kool/ swallowed somebody's cognac/ & sat down/ waitin/ for a gd time

MAXINE

(rises & hugs ross)

aw ross/ when am i gonna get a chance to feel somethin like that/ i got into this business cuz i wanted to feel things all the time/ & all they want me to do is put my leg in my face/ smile/ &

LILY

you better knock on some wood/ maxine/ at least yr workin

BETTINA

& at least yr not playin a whore/ if some other woman comes in here & tells me she's playin a whore/ i think i might kill her

ELI

you'd kill her so you cd say/ oh dahlia died & i know all her lines

BETTINA

aw hush up eli/ dnt you know what i mean?

ELI

no miss/ i dont/ are you in the theater?

BETTINA

Mr˙ bartender/ poet sir/ i am theater

DAHLIA

well miss theater/ that's a surprise/ especially since you fell all over the damn stage in the middle of my solo

LILY

she did

ELI

miss theater herself fell down?

DAHLIA

yeah/ she cant figure out how to get attention without makin somebody else look bad

MAXINE

now dahlia/ it waznt that bad/ i hardly noticed her

DAHLIA

it waz my solo/ you werent sposed to notice her at all!

BETTINA

you know dahlia/ i didnt do it on purpose/ i cda hurt myself

DAHLIA

that wd be unfortunate

BETTINA

well miss thing with those big ass hips you got/ i dont know why you think you can do the ballet anyway

(the company breaks; they're expecting a fight)

DAHLIA

(crossing to bettina)

i got this

(demonstrates her leg extension)

& alla this

(dahlia turns her back to bettina/ & slaps her own backside. bettina grabs dahlia, turns her around & they begin a series of finger snaps that are a paraphrase of ailey choreography for very dangerous fights. eli comes to break up the impending alteraction)

ELI

ladies ladies ladies

(eli separates the two)

ELI
people keep tellin me to put my feet on the ground
i get mad & scream/ there is no ground
only shit pieces from dogs horses & men who dont live
anywhere/ they tell me think straight & make myself
somethin/ i shout & sigh/ i am a poet/ i write poems
i make words cartwheel & somersault down pages
outta my mouth come visions distilled like bootleg
whiskey/ i am like a radio but i am a channel of my own
i keep sayin i write poems/ & people keep askin me
what do i do/ what in the hell is going on?
people keep tellin me these are hard times/ what are
you gonna be doin ten years from now/
what in the hell do you think/ i am gonna be writin poems
i will have poems inchin up the walls of the lincoln tunnel/
i am gonna feed my children poems on rye bread with horseradish/
i am gonna send my mailman off with a poem for his wagon/
give my doctor a poem for his heart/ i am a poet/
i am not a part-time poet/ i am not a amateur poet/
i dont even know what that person cd be/ whoever that is
authorizing poetry as an avocation/ is a fraud/
put yr own feet on the ground
BETTINA

i'm sorry eli/ i just dont want to be a gypsy all my life

(the bar returns to normal humming & sipping. the lights change to focus on lily/ who begins to say what's really been on her mind. the rest of the company is not aware of lily's private thoughts. only bettina responds to lily, but as a partner in fantasy, not as a voyeur)

LILY

(illustrating her words with movement)

i'm gonna simply brush my hair. rapunzel pull yr tresses back into the tower. & lady godiva give up horseback riding. i'm gonna alter my social & professional life dramatically. i will brush 100 strokes in the morning/ 100 strokes midday & 100 strokes before retiring. i will have a very busy schedule. between the local trains & the express/ i'm gonna brush. i brush between telephone calls. at the disco i'm gonna brush on the slow songs/ i dont slow dance with strangers. i'ma brush my hair before making love & after. i'll brush my hair in taxis. while windowshopping. when i have visitors over the kitchen table/ i'ma brush. i brush my hair while thinking abt anything. mostly i think abt how it will be when i get my full heada hair. like lifting my head in the morning will become a chore. i'll try to turn my cheek & my hair will weigh me down

(lily falls to the floor. bettina helps lift her to her knees, then begins to dance & mime as lily speaks)

i dream of chaka khan/ chocolate from graham central station with all seven wigs/ & medusa. i brush & brush. i use olive oil hair food/ & posner's vitamin E˙ but mostly i brush & brush. i may lose contact with most of my friends. i cd lose my job/ but i'm on unemployment & brush while waiting on line for my check. i'm sure i get good recommendations from my social worker: such a fastidious woman/ that lily/ always brushing her hair. nothing in my dreams suggests that hair brushing/ per se/ has anything to do with my particular heada hair. a therapist might say that the head fulla hair has to do with something else/ like: a symbol of lily's unconscious desires. but i have no therapist

(she takes imaginary pen from bettina, who was pretending to be a therapist/ & sits down at table across from her)

& my dreams mean things to me/ like if you dreamed abt tobias/ then something has happened to tobias/ or he is gonna show up. if you dream abt yr grandma who's dead/ then you must be doing something she doesnt like/ or she wdnta gone to all the trouble to leave heaven like that. if you dream something red/ you shd stop. if you dream something green/ you shd keep doing it. if a blue person appears in yr dreams/ then that person is yr true friend & that's how i see my dreams. & this head fulla hair i have in my dreams is lavender & nappy as a 3-yr-old's in a apple tree. i can fry an egg & see the white of the egg spreadin in the grease like my hair is gonna spread in the air/ but i'm not egg-yolk yellow/ i am brown & the egg white isnt white at all/ it is my actual hair/ & it wd go on & on forever/ irregular like a rasta-man's hair. irregular/ gargantuan & lavender. nestled on blue satin pillows/ pillows like the sky. & so i fry my eggs. i buy daisies dyed lavender & laced lavender tablemats & lavender nail polish. though i never admit it/ i really do believe in magic/ & can do strange things when something comes over me. soon everything around me will be lavender/ fluffy & consuming. i will know not a moment of bitterness/ through all the wrist aching & tennis elbow from brushing/ i'll smile. no regrets/ "je ne regrette rien" i'll sing like edith piaf. when my friends want me to go see tina turner or pacheco/ i'll croon "sorry/ i have to brush my hair." i'll find ambrosia. my hair'll grow pomegranates & soil/ rich as round the aswan/ i wake in my bed to bananas/ avocados/ collard greens/ the tramps' latest disco hit/ fresh croissant/ pouilly fuissé/ ishmael reed's essays/ charlotte carter's stories/ all stream from my hair. & with the bricks that plop from where a 9-year-old's top braid wd be/ i will brush myself a house with running water & a bidet. i'll have a closet full of clean bed linen & the lil girl from the castro convertible commercial will come & open the bed repeatedly & stay on as a helper to brush my hair. lily is the only person i know whose every word leaves a purple haze on the tip of yr tongue. when this happens i says clouds are forming/ & i has to close the windows. violet rain is hard to remove from blue satin pillows

(lou, the magician, gets up. he points to lily sitting very still. he reminds us that it is only thru him that we are able to know these people without the "masks"/ the lies/ & he cautions that all their thoughts are not benign. they are not safe from what they remember or imagine)

LOU

you have t come with me/ to this place where magic is/
to hear my song/ some times i forget & leave my tune
in the corner of the closet under all the dirty clothes/
in this place/ magic asks me where i've been/ how i've
been singin/ lately i leave my self in all the wrong hands/
in this place where magic is involved in
undoin our masks/ i am able to smile & answer that.
in this place where magic always asks for me
i discovered a lot of other people who talk without mouths
who listen to what you say/ by watchin yr jewelry dance
& in this place where magic stays
you can let yrself in or out
but when you leave yrself at home/ burglars & daylight thieves
pounce on you & sell yr skin/ at cut-rates on tenth avenue

(ross has been playing the acoustic guitar softly as lou spoke. alec picks up on the train of lou's thoughts & tells a story that in turn captures natalie's attention. slowly, natalie becomes the woman alec describes)

ALEC
she had always wanted a baby/ never a family/ never a man/
she had always wanted a baby/ who wd suckle & sleep
a baby boy who wd wet/ & cry/ & smile
suckle & sleep
when she sat in bars/ on the stool/ near the door/ & cross from the juke
box/ with her legs straddled & revealin red lace pants/ & lil hair smashed
under the stockings/ she wd think how she wanted this baby & how she
wd call the baby/ "myself" & as she thot/ bout this brown lil thing/ she
ordered another bourbon/ double & tilted her head as if to cuddle some
infant/ not present/ the men in the bar never imagined her as someone's
mother/ she rarely tended her own self carefully/

(natalie rises slowly, sits astride on the floor)

just enough to exude a languid sexuality that teased the men off work/ & the bartender/ ray who waz her only friend/ women didnt take to her/ so she spent her afternoons with ray/ in the bar round the corner from her lil house/ that shook winsomely in a hard wind/ surrounded by three weepin willows

NATALIE

my name is sue-jean & i grew here/ a ordinary colored girl with no claims to any thing/ or anyone/ i drink now/ bourbon/ in harder times/ beer/ but i always wanted to have a baby/ a lil boy/ named myself

ALEC

one time/ she made it with ray

NATALIE

& there waz nothin special there/ only a hot rough bangin/ a brusque barrelin throwin of torso/ legs & sweat/ ray wanted to kiss me/ but i screamed/ cuz i didnt like kissin/ only fuckin/ & we rolled round/ i waz a peculiar sorta woman/ wantin no kisses/ no caresses/ just power/ heat & no eaziness of thrust/ ray pulled himself outa me/ with no particular exclamation/ he smacked me on my behind/ i waz grinnin/ & he took that as a

indication of his skill/ he believed he waz a good lover/ & a woman like me/ didnt never want nothin but a hard dick/ & everyone believed that/ tho no one in town really knew

ALEC

so ray/ went on behind the bar cuz he had got his

NATALIE

& i lay in the corner laughin/ with my drawers/ twisted round my ankles & my hair standin every which way/ i waz laughin/ knowin i wd have this child/ myself/ & no one wd ever claim him/ cept me cuz i waz a low-down thing/ layin in sawdust & whiskey stains/ i laughed & had a good time masturbatin in the shadows.

ALEC

sue-jean ate starch for good luck

NATALIE

like mama kareena/ tol me

ALEC

& she planted five okras/ five collards/ & five tomatoes

NATALIE

for good luck too/ i waz gonna have this baby/ i even went over to the hospital to learn prenatal care/ & i kept myself clean

ALEC

sue-jean's lanky body got ta spreadin & her stomach waz taut & round high in her chest/ a high pregnancy is sure to be a boy/ & she smiled

NATALIE

i stopped goin to the bar

ALEC

started cannin food

NATALIE

knittin lil booties

ALEC

even goin to church wit the late nite radio evangelist

NATALIE

i gotta prayer cloth for the boy/ myself waz gonna be safe from all that his mama/ waz prey to

ALEC

sure/ sue-jean waz a scandal/ but that waz to be expected/ cuz she waz always a po criterish chile

NATALIE

& wont no man bout step my way/ ever/ just cuz i hadda bad omen on me/ from the very womb/ i waz bewitched is what the ol women usedta say

ALEC

sue-jean waz born on a full moon/ the year of the flood/ the night the river raised her skirts & sat over alla the towns & settlements for 30 miles in each direction/ the nite the river waz in labor/ gruntin & groanin/ splittin trees & families/ spillin cupboards over the ground/ waz the nite sue-jean waz born

NATALIE

& my mother died/ drownin/ holdin me up over the mud crawlin in her mouth

ALEC

somebody took her & she lived to be the town's no one/ now with the boy achin & dancin in her belly/ sue-jean waz a gay & gracious woman/ she made pies/ she baked cakes & left them on the stoop of the church she had never entered just cuz she wanted/ & she grew plants & swept her floors/ she waz someone she had never known/ she waz herself with child/ & she waz a wonderful bulbous thing

NATALIE

the nite/ myself waz born/ ol mama kareena from the hills came down to see bout me/ i hollered & breathed/ i did exactly like mama kareena said/ & i pushed & pushed & there waz a earthquake up in my womb/ i wanted to sit up & pull the tons of logs trapped in my crotch out/ so i cd sleep/ but it wdnt go way/ i pushed & thot i saw 19 horses runnin in my pussy/ i waz sure there waz a locomotive stalled up in there burnin coal & steamin & pushin gainst a mountain

ALEC

finally the child's head waz within reach & mama kareena/ brought the boy into this world

NATALIE

& he waz awright/ with alla his toes & his fingers/ his lil dick & eyes/ elbows that bent/ & legs/ straight/ i wanted a big glassa bourbon/ & mama kareena brought it/ right away/ we sat drinkin the bourbon/ & lookin at the child whose name waz myself/ like i had wanted/ & the two of us ate placenta stew . . . i waznt really sure . . .

ALEC

sue-jean you werent really sure you wanted myself to wake up/ you always wanted him to sleep/ or at most to nurse/ the nites yr dreams were disturbed by his cryin

NATALIE

i had no one to help me

ALEC

so you were always with him/ & you didnt mind/ you knew this waz yr baby/ myself/ & you cuddled him/ carried him all over the house with you all day/ no matter/ what

NATALIE

everythin waz going awright til/ myself wanted to crawl

ALEC

(moving closer to natalie)

& discover a world of his own/ then you became despondent/ & yr tits began to dry & you lost the fullness of yr womb/ where myself/ had lived

NATALIE

i wanted that back

ALEC

you wanted back the milk

NATALIE

& the tight gourd of a stomach i had when myself waz bein in me

ALEC

so you slit his wrists

NATALIE

he waz sleepin

ALEC

sucked the blood back into yrself/ & waited/ myself shriveled up in his crib

NATALIE

a dank lil blk thing/ i never touched him again

ALEC

you were always holdin yr womb/ feelin him kick & sing to you bout love/ & you wd hold yr tit in yr hand

NATALIE

like i always did when i fed him

ALEC

& you waited & waited/ for a new myself. tho there were labor pains

NATALIE

& i screamed in my bed

ALEC

yr legs pinnin to the air

NATALIE

spinnin sometimes like a ferris wheel/ i cd get no child to fall from me

ALEC

& she forgot abt the child bein born/ & waz heavy & full all her life/ with "myself"

NATALIE

who'll be out/ any day now

(eli moves from behind the bar to help natalie/ or to clean tables. he doesnt really know. he stops suddenly)

ELI
aint that a goddamn shame/ aint that a way
to come into the world
sometimes i really cant write
sometimes i cant even talk

(the minstrel mask comes down very slowly. blackout, except for lights on the big minstrel mask which remains visible throughout intermission)

Act 2

(all players onstage are frozen, except lou, who makes a motion for the big minstrel mask to disappear again. as the mask flies up, lou begins)

LOU
in this place where magic stays
you can let yrself in or out

(he makes a magic motion. a samba is heard from the jukebox & activity is begun in the bar again. dahlia, natalie & lily enter, apparently from the ladies room)

NATALIE

i swear we went to that audition in good faith/ & that man asked us where we learned to speak english so well/ i swear this foreigner/ asked us/ from the city of new york/ where we learned to speak english.

LILY

all i did was say "bom dia/ como vai"/ and the englishman got red in the face

LOU

(as the englishman)

yr from the states/ aren't you?

LILY

"sim"/ i said/ in good portuguese

LOU

but you speak portuguese

LILY

"sim" i said/ in good portuguese

LOU

how did you pick that up?

LILY

i hadda answer so simple/ i cdnt say i learned it/ cuz niggahs cant learn & that wda been too hard on the man/ so i said/ in good english: i held my ear to the ground & listened to the samba from bêlim

DAHLIA

you should have said: i make a lotta phone calls to casçais, portugao

BETTINA

i gotta bahiano boyfriend

NATALIE

how abt: i waz an angolan freedom fighter

MAXINE

no/ lily/ tell him: i'm a great admirer of zeza motto & leci brandao

LILY

when the japanese red army invaded san juan/ they poisoned the papaya with portuguese. i eat a lotta papaya. last week/ i developed a strange schizophrenic condition/ with 4 manifest personalities: one spoke english & understood nothing/ one spoke french & had access to the world/ one spoke spanish & voted against statehood for puerto rico/ one spoke portuguese. "eu naõ falo ingles entaõ y voce"/ i dont speak english anymore/ & you?

(all the women in the company have been doing samba steps as the others spoke/ now they all dance around a table in their own ritual/ which stirs alec & lou to interrupt this female segregation. the women scatter to different tables, leaving the two interlopers alone. so, alec & lou begin their conversation)

ALEC

not only waz she without a tan, but she held her purse close to her hip like a new yorker. someone who rode the paris métro or listened to mariachis in plaza santa cecilia. she waz not from here

(he sits at table)

LOU

(following suit)

but from there

ALEC

some there where coloureds/ mulattoes/ negroes/ blacks cd make a living big enough to leave there to come here/ where no one went there much any more for all sorts of reasons

LOU

the big reasons being immigration restrictions & unemployment. nowadays, immigration restrictions of every kind apply to any non-european persons who want to go there from here

ALEC

some who want to go there from here risk fetching trouble with the customs authority there

LOU

or later with the police, who can tell who's not from there cuz the shoes are pointed & laced strange

ALEC

the pants be for august & yet it's january

LOU

the accent is patterned for pétionville, but working in crown heights

ALEC

what makes a person comfortably ordinary here cd make him dangerously conspicuous there.

LOU

so some go to london or amsterdam or paris/ where they are so abounding no one tries to tell who is from where

ALEC

still the far right wing of every there prints lil pamphlets that say everyone from there shd leave & go back where they came from

LOU

this is manifest legally thru immigration restrictions & personally thru unemployment

ALEC

anyway the yng woman waz from there/ & she waz alone. that waz good. cuz if a person had no big brother in gronigen/ no aunt in rouen

LOU

no sponsor in chicago

ALEC

this brown woman from there might be a good idea. everybody in the world/ european & non-european alike/ everybody knows that rich white girls are hard to find. some of them joined the weather underground/ some the baader-meinhof gang.

LOU

a whole bunch of them gave up men entirely

ALEC

so the exotic lover in the sun routine becomes more difficult to swing/ if she wants to talk abt plastic explosives & the resistance of the black masses to socialism/ instead of giving head as the tide slips in or lending money

LOU

just for the next few days

ALEC

is hard to find a rich white girl who is so dumb/ too

LOU

anyway. the whole world knows/ european & non-european alike/ the whole world knows that nobody loves the black woman like they love farrah fawcett-majors. the whole world dont turn out for a dead black woman like they did for marilyn monroe.

ALEC

actually/ the demise of josephine baker waz an international event

LOU

but she waz a war hero the worldwide un-beloved black woman is a good idea/ if she is from there & one is a young man with gd looks/ piercing eyes/ & knowledge of several romantic languages

(throughout this conversation, alec & lou will make attempts to seduce, cajole, & woo the women of the bar as their narrative indicates. the women play the roles as described, being so moved by romance)

ALEC

the best dancing spots/ the hill where one can see the entire bay at twilight

LOU

the beach where the seals & pelicans run free/ the hidden "local" restaurants

ALEC

"aw babee/ you so pretty" begins often in the lobby of hotels where the bright handsome yng men wd be loiterers

LOU

were they not needed to tend the needs of the black women from there

ALEC

tourists are usually white people or asians who didnt come all this way to meet a black woman who isnt even foreign

LOU

so hotel managers wink an eye at the yng men in the lobby or by the bar who wd be loitering/ but are gonna help her have a gd time

ALEC

maybe help themselves too

LOU

everybody in the world/ european & non-european alike/ everybody knows the black woman from there is not treated as a princess/ as a jewel/ a cherished lover

ALEC

that's not how sapphire got her reputation/ nor how Mrs˙ jefferson perceives the world

LOU

you know/ babee/ you dont act like them. aw babee/ you so pretty

ALEC

the yng man in the hotel watches the yng blk woman sit & sit & sit/ while the european tourists dance with each other/ & the dapper local fellas mambo frenetically with secretaries from arizona/ in search of the missing rich white girl. our girl sits &

female cast members

(in unison)

sits & sits & sits

ALEC

(to dahlia & natalie, who move to the music)

maybe she is courageous & taps her foot. maybe she is bold & enjoys the music/ smiling/ shaking shoulders. let her sit & let her know she is unwanted

LOU

she is not white & she is not from here

ALEC

let her know she is not pretty enuf to dance the next merengue. then appear/ mysteriously/ in the corner of the bar. stare at her. just stare. when stevie wonder's song/ "isnt she lovely"/ blares thru the red-tinted light/ ask her to dance & hold her as tyrone power wda. hold her & stare

(ross & eli sing the chorus to stevie wonder's "isn't she lovely")

LOU

dance yr ass off. she has been discovered by the non-european fred astaire

ALEC

let her know she is a surprise/ an event. by the look on yr face you've never seen anyone like this black woman from there. you say: "aw/ you not from here?"/ totally astonished. she murmurs that she is from there. as if to apologize for her unfortunate place of birth

LOU

you say

ALEC

aw babee/ you so pretty. & it's all over

LOU

a night in a pension near the sorbonne. pick her up from the mattress. throw her gainst the wall in a show of exotic temper & passion: "maintenant/ tu es ma femme. nous nous sommes mariés." unions of this sort are common wherever the yng black women travel alone. a woman traveling alone is an affront to the non-european man who is known the world over/ to european & non-european alike/ for his way with women

ALEC

his sense of romance/ how he can say:

LOU

aw babee/ you so pretty . . . and even a beautiful woman will believe no one else ever recognized her loveliness

ELI

or else/ he comes to a cafe in willemstad in the height of the sunset. an able-bodied/ sinewy yng man who

wants to buy one beer for the yng woman. after the first round/ he discovers he has run out of money/ so she must buy the next round/ when he discovers/ what beautiful legs you have/ how yr mouth is like the breath of tiger lilies. we shall make love in the/ how you call it/ yes in the earth/ in the dirt/ i will have you in my/ how you say/ where things grow/ aw/ yes/ i will have you in the soil. probably under the stars & smelling of wine/ an unforgettable international affair can be consummated

(the company sings "tara's theme" as eli ends his speech. eli & bettina take a tango walk to the bar, while maxine mimics a 1930's photographer, shooting them as they sail off into the sunset)

MAXINE

at 11:30 one evening i waz at the port authority/ new york/ united states/ myself. now i waz there & i spoke english & waz holding approximately $7 american currency/ when a yng man from there came up to me from the front of the line of people waiting for the princeton new jersey united states local bus. i mean to say/ he gave up his chance for a good seat to come say to me:

ROSS

i never saw a black woman reading nietzsche

MAXINE

i waz demure enough/ i said i have to for a philosophy class. but as the night went on i noticed this yng man waz so much like the other yng men from here/ who use their bodies as bait & their smiles as passport alternatives. anyway the night did go on. we were snuggled together in the rear of the bus going down the jersey turnpike. he told me in english/ that he had spoken all his life in st˙ louis/ where he waz raised:

ROSS

i've wanted all my life to meet someone like you. i want you to meet my family/ who haven't seen me in a long time/ since i left missouri looking for opportunity . . .

(he is lost for words)

LOU

(stage whisper)

opportunity to sculpt

ROSS

thank you/ opportunity to sculpt

MAXINE

he had been everyplace/ he said

ROSS

you arent like any black woman i've ever met anywhere

MAXINE

here or there

ROSS

i had to come back to new york cuz of immigration restrictions & high unemployment among black american sculptors abroad

MAXINE

just as we got to princeton/ he picked my face up from his shoulder & said:

ROSS

aw babee/ you so pretty

MAXINE

aw babee/ you so pretty. i believe that night i must have looked beautiful for a black woman from there/ though i cd be asked at any moment to tour the universe/ to climb a 6-story walkup with a brilliant & starving painter/ to share kadushi/ to meet mama/ to getta kiss each time the swing falls toward the willow branch/ to imagine where he say he from/ & more. i cd/ i cd have all of it/ but i cd not be taken/ long as i don't let a stranger be the first to say:

LOU

aw babee/ you so pretty

MAXINE

after all/ immigration restrictions & unemployment cd drive a man to drink or to lie

(*she breaks away from ross*)

so if you know yr beautiful & bright & cherishable awready/ when he say/ in whatever language:

ALEC

(*to natalie*)

aw babee/ you so pretty

MAXINE

you cd say:

NATALIE

i know. thank you

MAXINE

then he'll smile/ & you'll smile. he'll say:

ELI

(*stroking bettina's thigh*)

what nice legs you have

MAXINE

you can say:

BETTINA

(*removing his hand*)

yes. they run in the family

MAXINE

oh! whatta universe of beautiful & well traveled women!

male cast members

(*in unison*)

aw babee/ i've never met anyone like you

female cast members

(*in unison, pulling away from men to stage edges*)

that's strange/ there are millions of us!

(*men all cluster after unsuccessful attempts to persuade their women to talk. alec gets the idea to serenade the women; ross takes the first verse, with men singing back-up. song is "ooh baby," by smokey robinson*)

ROSS

(*singing*)

i did you wrong/ my heart went out to play/ but in the game
i lost you/ what a price to pay/ i'm cryin . . .
male players

(*singing*)

oo oo oo/ baby baby. . . . oo oo oo/ baby baby

(*this bring no response from the women; the men elect eli to lead the second verse*)

ELI
mistakes i know i've made a few/ but i'm only human
you've made mistakes too/ i'm cryin . . .
oo oo oo/ baby baby . . . oo oo oo/ baby baby

(*the women slowly forsake their staunch indignation/ returning to the arms of their partners. all that is except lily, who walks abt the room of couples awkwardly*)

male cast members & lily

(*singing*)

i'm just about at the end of my rope
but i can't stop trying/ i cant give up hope
cause i/ i believe one day/ i'll hold you near
whisper i love you/ until that day is here
i'm cryin . . . oo oo oo/ baby baby

(*lily begins as the company continues to sing*)

LILY
unfortunately
the most beautiful man in the world
is unavailable
that's what he told me
i saw him wandering abt/ said well this is one of a kind
& i might be able to help him out
so alone & pretty in all this ganja & bodies melting
he danced with me & i cd become that
a certain way to be held that's considered in advance
a way a thoughtful man wd kiss a woman who
cd be offended easily/ but waznt cuz
of course the most beautiful man in the world
knows exactly what to do
with someone who knows that's who he is/
these dreads fallin thru my dress
so my nipples just stood up
these hands playin the guitar on my back
the lips somewhere between my neck
& my forehead
talking bout ocho rios & how i really must go
marcus garvey cda come in the door & we/
we wd still be dancin that dance
the motion that has more to do with kinetic energy
than shootin stars/ more to do with the impossibility
of all this/ & how it waz awready bein too much
our reason failed
we tried to go away & be just together
aside from the silence that weeped
with greed/ we didnt need/ anything/ but one another
for tonite
but he is the most beautiful man in the world
says he's unavailable/
& this man whose eyes made me
half-naked & still & brazen/ was singin with me
since we cd not talk/ we sang

(*male players end their chorus with a flourish*)

LILY

we sang with bob marley
this man/ surely the most beautiful man in the world/ & i
sang/ "i wanna love you & treat you right/

(*the couples begin different kinds of reggae dances*)

i wanna love you every day & every nite"

the company

(*dancing & singing*)

we'll be together with the roof right over our heads
we'll share the shelter of my single bed
we'll share the same room/ jah provide the bread
DAHLIA

(*stops dancing during conversation*)

i tell you it's not just the part that makes me love you so much

LOU

what is it/ wait/ i know/ you like my legs

DAHLIA

yes/ uh huh/ yr legs & yr arms/ & . . .

LOU

but that's just my body/ you started off saying you loved me & now i see it's just my body

DAHLIA

oh/ i didnt mean that/ it's just i dont know you/ except as the character i'm sposed to love/ & well i know rehearsal is over/ but i'm still in love with you

(*they go to the bar to get drinks, then sit at a table*)

ROSS

but baby/ you have to go on the road. we need the money

NATALIE

i'm not going on the road so you can fuck all these aspiring actresses

ROSS

aw/ just some of them/ baby

NATALIE

that's why i'm not going

ROSS

if you dont go on the road i'll still be fuckin em/ but you & me/ we'll be in trouble/ you understand?

NATALIE

(*stops dancing*)

no i dont understand

ROSS

well let me break it down to you

NATALIE

please/ break it down to me

BETTINA

(*stops dancing*)

hey/ natalie/ why dont you make him go on the road/ they always want us to be so goddamned conscientious

ALEC

(*stops dancing*)

dont you think you shd mind yr own bizness?

NATALIE

yeah bettina/ mind yr own bizness

(*she pulls ross to a table with her*)

BETTINA

(*to alec*)

no/ i'm tired of having to take any & every old job to support us/ & you get to have artistic integrity & refuse parts that are beneath you

ALEC

thats right/ i'm not playing the fool or the black buck pimp circus/ i'm an actor not a stereotype/ i've been trained. you know i'm a classically trained actor

BETTINA

& just what do you think we are?

MAXINE

well/ i got offered another whore part downtown

ELI

you gonna take it?

MAXINE

yeah

LILY

if you dont/ i know someone who will

ALEC

(*to bettina*)

i told you/ we arent gonna get anyplace/ by doin every bit part for a niggah that someone waves in fronta my face

BETTINA

& we arent gonna live long on nothin/ either/ cuz i'm quittin my job

ALEC

be in the real world for once & try to understand me

BETTINA

you mean/ i shd understand that you are the great artist & i'm the trouper.

ALEC

i'm not sayin that we cant be gigglin & laughin all the time dancin around/ but i cant stay in these "hate whitey" shows/ cuz they arent true

BETTINA

a failure of imagination on yr part/ i take it

ALEC

no/ an insult to my person

BETTINA

oh i see/ you wanna give the people some more make-believe

ALEC

i cd always black up again & do minstrel work/ wd that make you happy?

BETTINA

there is nothin niggardly abt a decent job. work is honorable/ work!

ALEC

well/ i got a problem. i got lots of problems/ but i got one i want you to fix & if you can fix it/ i'll do anything you say. last spring this niggah from the midwest asked for president carter to say he waz sorry for that forgettable phenomenon/ slavery/ which brought us all together. i never did get it/ none of us ever got no apology from no white folks abt not bein considered human beings/ that makes me mad & tired. someone told me "roots" was the way white folks worked out their guilt/ the success of "roots" is the way white folks assuaged their consciences/ i dont know this/ this is what i waz told. i dont get any pleasure from nobody watchin me trying to be a slave i once waz/ who got away/ when we all know they had an emancipation proclamation/ that the civil war waz not fought over us. we all know that we/ actually dont exist unless we play football or basketball or baseball or soccer/ pélé/ see they still import a strong niggah to earn money. art here/ isnt like in the old country/ where we had some spare time & did what we liked to do/ i dont know this either/ this is also something i've been told. i just want to find out why no one has even been able to sound a gong & all the reporters recite that the gong is ringin/ while we watch all the white people/ immigrants & invaders/ conquistadors & relatives of london debtors from georgia/ kneel & apologize to us/ just for three or four minutes. now/ this is not impossible/ & someone shd make a day where a few minutes of the pain of our lives is acknowledged. i have never been very interested in what white people did/ cuz i waz able/ like most of us/ to have very lil to do with them/ but if i become a success that means i have to talk to white folks more than in high school/ they are everywhere/ you know how they talk abt a neighborhood changin/ we suddenly become all over the place/ they are now all over my life/ & i dont like it. i am not talkin abt poets & painters/ not abt women & lovers of beauty/ i am talkin abt that proverbial white person who is usually a man who just/ turns yr body around/ looks at yr teeth & yr ass/ who feels yr calves & back/ & agrees on a price. we are/ you see/ now able to sell ourselves/ & i am still a person who is tired/ a person who is not into his demise/ just three minutes for our lives/ just three minutes of silence & a gong in st˙ louis/ oakland/ in los angeles . . .

(*the entire company looks at him as if he's crazy/ he tries to leave the bar/ but bettina stops him*)

BETTINA

you're still outta yr mind. ain't no apologies keeping us alive.

LOU

what are you gonna do with white folks kneeling all over the country anyway/ man

(*lou signals everyone to kneel*)

LILY

they say i'm too light to work/ but when i asked him what he meant/ he said i didnt actually look black. but/ i said/ my mama knows i'm black & my daddy/ damn sure knows i'm black/ & he is the only one who has a problem thinkin i'm black/ i said so let me play a white girl/ i'm a classically trained actress & i need the work & i can do it/ he said that wdnt be very ethical of him. can you imagine that shit/ not ethical

NATALIE

as a red-blooded white woman/ i cant allow you all to go on like that

(*natalie starts jocularly*)

cuz today i'm gonna be a white girl/ i'll retroactively wake myself up/ ah low & behold/ a white girl in my

bed/ but first i'll haveta call a white girl i know to have some more accurate information/ what's the first thing white girls think in the morning/ do they get up being glad they aint niggahs/ do they remember mama/ or worry abt gettin to work/ do they work?/ do they play isadora & wrap themselves in sheets & go tip toeing to the kitchen to make maxwell house coffee/ oh i know/ the first thing a white girl does in the morning is fling her hair/ so now i'm done with that/ i'm gonna water my plants/ but am i a po white trash white girl with a old jellyjar/ or am i a sophisticated & protestant suburbanite with 2 valiums slugged awready & a porcelain water carrier leading me up the stairs strewn with heads of dolls & nasty smellin white husband person's underwear/ if i was really protected from the niggahs/ i might go to early morning mass & pick up a tomato pie on the way home/ so i cd eat it during the young & the restless. in williams arizona as a white girl/ i cd push the navaho women outta my way in the supermarket & push my nose in the air so i wdnt haveta smell them. coming from bay ridge on the train i cd smile at all the black & puerto rican people/ & hope they cant tell i want them to go back where they came from/ or at least be invisible i'm still in my kitchen/ so i guess i'll just have to fling my hair again & sit down. i shd pinch my cheeks to bring the color back/ i wonder why the colored lady hasnt arrived to clean my house yet/ so i cd go to the beauty parlor & sit under a sunlamp to get some more color back/ it's terrible how god gave those colored women such clear complexions/ it take em years to develop wrinkles/ but beauty can be bought & flattered into the world. as a white girl on the street/ i can assume since i am a white girl on the streets/ that everyone notices how beautiful i am/ especially lil black & caribbean boys/ they love to look at me/ i'm exotic/ no one in their families looks like me/ poor things. if i waz one of those white girls who loves one of those grown black fellas/ i cd say with my eyes wide open/ totally sincere/ oh i didnt know that/ i cd say i didnt know/ i cant/ i dont know how/ cuz i'ma white girl & i dont have to do much of anything. all of this is the fault of the white man's sexism/ oh how i loathe tight-assed thin-lipped pink white men/ even the football players lack a certain relaxed virility. that's why my heroes are either just like my father/ who while he still cdnt speak english knew enough to tell me how the niggers shd go back where they came from/ or my heroes are psychotic faggots who are white/ or else they are/ oh/ you know/ colored men. being a white girl by dint of my will/ is much more complicated than i thought it wd be/ but i wanted to try it cuz so many men like white girls/ white men/ black men/ latin men/ jewish men/ asians/ everybody. so i thought if i waz a white girl for a day i might understand this better/ after all gertrude stein wanted to know abt the black women/ alice adams wrote *thinking abt billie*/ joyce carol oates has three different black characters all with the same name/ i guess cuz we are underdeveloped individuals or cuz we are all the same/ at any rate i'm gonna call this thinkin abt white girls/ cuz helmut newton's awready gotta book called *white women*/ see what i mean/ that's a best seller/ one store i passed/ hadda sign said/

WHITE WOMEN SOLD OUT

it's this kinda pressure that forces us white girls to be so absolutely pathological abt the other women in the world/ who now that they're not all servants or peasants want to be considered beautiful too. we simply krinkle our hair/ learn to dance the woogie dances/ slant our eyes with make-up or surgery/ learn spanish & claim argentinian background/ or as a real trump card/ show up looking like a real white girl. you know all western civilization depends on us/ i still havent left my house. i think i'll fling my hair once more/ but this time with a pout/ cuz i think i havent been fair to the sisterhood/ women's movement faction of white girls/ although/ they always ask what do you people really want. as if the colored woman of the world were a strange sort of neutered workhorse/ which isnt too far from reality/ since i'm still waiting for my cleaning lady & the lady who takes care of my children & the lady who caters my parties & the lady who accepts quarters at the bathroom in sardi's. those poor creatures shd be sterilized/ no one shd have to live such a life. cd you hand me a towel/ thank-you caroline. i've left all of maxime's last winter clothes in a pile for you by the back door. they have to be cleaned but i hope yr girls can make gd use of them. oh/ i'm still not being fair/ all the white women in the world dont wake up being glad they aint niggahs/ only some of them/ the ones who dont/ wake up thinking how can i survive another day of this culturally condoned incompetence. i know i'll play a tenor horn & tell all the colored artists i meet/ that now i'm just like them/ i'm colored i'll say cuz i have a struggle too. or i cd punish this white beleagered body of mine with the advances of a thousand ebony

bodies/ all built like franco harris or peter tosh/ a thousand of them may take me & do what they want/ cuz i'm so sorry/ yes i'm so sorry they were born niggahs. but then if i cant punish myself to death for being white/ i certainly cant in good conscience keep waiting for the cleaning lady/ & everytime i attempt even the smallest venture into the world someone comes to help me/ like if i do anything/ anything at all i'm extending myself as a white girl/ cuz part of being a white girl is being absent/ like those women who are just with a man but whose names the black people never remember/ they just say oh yeah his white girl waz with him/ or a white girl got beat & killed today/ why someone will say/ cuz some niggah told her to give him her money & she said no/ cuz she thought he realized that she waz a white girl/ & he did know but he didnt care/ so he killed her & took the money/ but the cops knew she waz a white girl & cdnt be killed by a niggah especially/ when she had awready said no. the niggah was sposed to hop round the corner backwards/ you dig/ so the cops/ found the culprit within 24 hours/ cuz just like emmett till/ niggahs do not kill white girls. i'm still in my house/ having flung my hair-do for the last time/ what with having to take 20 valium a day/ to consider the ERA/ & all the men in the world/ & my ignorance of the world/ it is overwhelming. i'm so glad i'm colored. boy i cd wake up in the morning & think abt anything. i can remember emmett till & not haveta smile at anybody.

MAXINE

(compelled to speak by natalie's pain)

whenever these things happened to me/ & i waz young/ i wd eat a lot/ or buy new fancy underwear with rhinestones & lace/ or go to the movies/ maybe call a friend/ talk to made-up boyfriends til dawn. this waz when i waz under my parents' roof/ & trees that grew into my room had to be cut back once a year/ this waz when the birds sometimes flew thru the halls of the house as if the ceilings were sky & i/ simply another winged creature. yet no one around me noticed me especially. no one around saw anything but a precocious brown girl with peculiar ideas. like during the polio epidemic/ i wanted to have a celebration/ which nobody cd understand since iron lungs & not going swimming waznt nothing to celebrate. but i explained that i waz celebrating the bounty of the lord/ which more people didnt understand/ til i went on to say that/ it waz obvious that god had protected the colored folks from polio/ nobody understood that. i did/ if god had made colored people susceptible to polio/ then we wd be on the pictures & the television with the white children. i knew only white folks cd get that particular disease/ & i celebrated. that's how come i always commemorated anything that affected me or the colored people. according to my history of the colored race/ not enough attention was paid to small victories or small personal defeats of the colored. i celebrated the colored trolley driver/ the colored basketball team/ the colored blues singer/ & the colored light heavy weight champion of the world. then too/ i had a baptist child's version of high mass for the slaves in new orleans whom i had read abt/ & i tried to grow watermelons & rice for the dead slaves from the east. as a child i took on the burden of easing the ghost-colored-folks' souls & trying hard to keep up with the affairs of my own colored world. when i became a woman, my world got smaller. my grandma closed up the windows/ so the birds wdnt fly in the house any more. waz bad luck for a girl so yng & in my condition to have the shadows of flying creatures over my head. i didnt celebrate the trolley driver anymore/ cuz he might know i waz in this condition. i didnt celebrate the basketball team anymore/ cuz they were yng & handsome/ & yng & handsome cd mean trouble. but trouble waz when white kids called you names or beat you up cuz you had no older brother/ trouble waz when someone died/ or the tornado hit yr house/ now trouble meant something abt yng & handsome/ & white or colored. if he waz yng & handsome that meant trouble. seemed like every one who didnt have this condition/ so birds cdnt fly over yr head/ waz trouble. as i understood it/ my mama & my grandma were sending me out to be with trouble/ but not to get into trouble. the yng & handsome cd dance with me & call for sunday supper/ the yng & handsome cd write my name on their notebooks/ cd carry my ribbons on the field for gd luck/ the uncles cd hug me & chat for hours abt my growing up/ so i counted all 492 times this condition wd make me victim to this trouble/ before i wd be immune to it/ the way colored folks were immune to polio. i had discovered innumerable manifestations of trouble: jealousy/ fear/ indignation & recurring fits of vulnerability that lead me right back to the contradiction i had never understood/ even as a

child/ how half the world's population cd be bad news/ be yng & handsome/ & later/ eligible & interested/ & trouble. plus/ according to my own version of the history of the colored people/ only white people hurt little colored girls or grown colored women/ my mama told me only white people had social disease & molested children/ and my grandma told me only white people committed unnatural acts. that's how come i knew only white folks got polio/ muscular dystrophy/ sclerosis/ & mental illness/ this waz all verified by the television. but i found out that the colored folks knew abt the same vicious & disease-ridden passions that the white folks knew. the pain i succumbed to each time a colored person did something that i believed only white people did waz staggering. my entire life seems to be worthless/ if my own folks arent better than white folks/ then surely the sagas of slavery & the jim crow hadnt convinced anyone that we were better than them. i commenced to buying pieces of gold/ 14 carat/ 24 carat/ 18 carat gold/ every time some black person did something that waz beneath him as a black person & more like a white person. i bought gold cuz it came from the earth/ & more than likely it came from south africa/ where the black people are humiliated & oppressed like in slavery. i wear all these things at once/ to remind the black people that it cost a lot for us to be here/ our value/ can be known instinctively/ but since so many black people are having a hard time not being like white folks/ i wear these gold pieces to protest their ignorance/ their disconnect from history. i buy gold with a vengeance/ each time someone appropriates my space or my time without permission/ each time someone is discourteous or actually cruel to me/ if my mind is not respected/ my body toyed with/ i buy gold/ & weep. i weep as i fix the chains round my neck/ my wrists/ my ankles. i weep cuz all my childhood ceremonies for the ghost-slaves have been in vain. colored people can get polio & mental illness. slavery is not unfamiliar to me. no one on this planet knows/ what i know abt gold/ abt anything hard to get & beautiful/ anything lasting/ wrought from pain. no one understands that surviving the impossible is sposed to accentuate the positive aspects of a people.

(alec is the only member of the company able to come immediately to maxine. when he reaches her, lou, in his full magician's regalia, freezes the whole company)

LOU
yes yes yes 3 wishes is all you get
scarlet ribbons for yr hair
a farm in mississippi
someone to love you madly
all things are possible
but aint no colored magician in his right mind
gonna make you white
cuz this is blk magic you lookin at
& i'm fixin you up good/ fixin you up good & colored
& you gonna be colored all yr life
& you gonna love it/ bein colored/ all yr life
colored & love it/ love it/ bein colored

(lou beckons the others to join him in the chant, "colored & love it." it becomes a serious celebration, like church/ like home/ but then lou freezes them suddenly.)

LOU
crackers are born with the right to be
alive/ i'm making ours up right here
in yr face/ & we gonna be
colored & love it

(the huge minstrel mask comes down as company continues to sing "colored & love it/ love it being colored." blackout/ but the minstrel mask remains visible. the company is singing "colored & love it being colored" as audience exits)

END OF PLAY.